



Kurt Mintell

Warriors face Transition

Life can change in an instant...

One moment you're doing your job, part of a team focused on the business at hand and then... that horrible instant when nothing will ever be the same again. That instant happens to many of our fighting men and women in the armed forces. In 2006, that instant happened to two Soldiers now assigned to an Army health care unit in Concord, Mass., -- Mike Pacheco and Kurt Mintell when they were on separate deployments in Iraq. But sometimes when that instant happens, and seemingly life will never be the same again, miracles happen.

The Department of Army wants the lives of its wounded service members to be whole and in 2004 eight Community Based Health Care Organizations (CBHCO) were created with one mission -- to help service members like Pacheco, a Major in the U.S. Army Reserves, and Mintell, a Sergeant in the Connecticut Army National Guard -- move on to the next moment in their lives. And now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers New England District is assisting the CBHCO of Massachusetts in a first of its kind program that will assist many of the casualties of the battlefield by providing opportunities for meaningful work assignments that complement their medical care and recovery program.

The program allows Soldiers wounded in the Global War on Terrorism an opportunity to return home, receive medical care locally while recovering in a familiar atmosphere surrounded by family and friends and, whenever possible, gain meaningful employment. While most Soldiers in this program return to local armories or reserve centers for individual work assignments, sometimes something special happens.

"Our population is National Guard and Reserve," explained Maj. Mark O'Clair, Commander of the Massachusetts CBHCO. "These are all part-time soldiers, so they all have civilian jobs outside of the military."

While the Soldiers convalesce, they are still being paid by the U.S. Army and still have to report to a work assignment when not going to medical appointments. Realizing that some Soldiers would respond better to a work environment similar to their civilian occupations, O'Clair turned to the New England District for assistance.

"We developed the Warrior Workplace Program so when Soldiers

arrive at Maj. O'Clair's unit, he would pass their names and skill sets to me and I would contact the District leadership to see if they had work available – the response was immediate and positive," said Mike Russo, Project Manager for the New England District Warrior Workplace Program.

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When Mintell wasn't serving his country in the 2/136th, 34th Infantry Division, he was a carpenter. He was used to working with his hands and being outdoors. Under the Warrior Workplace Program, Mintell, a Connecticut resident, works at the District's Thomaston Dam on various projects located in Thomaston, Conn., but only when time allows.

"First and foremost, the wounded Soldiers must take care of themselves," said O'Clair. "Medical appointments come first, and when they have time, they report to their Corps of Engineers work assignment."

New England District supervisors know ahead of time what the Soldier's skill sets are as well as any limitations.

"The good thing is the jobs that we've set up through the Corps of Engineers allows the Soldiers to do functional tasks that they can see success and actually accomplish something," said 1st Sgt. Dennis Donlan of the CBHCO. "A lot of times if

they go back to an armory they can't do their normal job and they sit for hours answering a phone. With Soldiers like Mintell, who are used to being outdoors, he's actually looking at construction jobs and doing things and interacting with people, which is a huge benefit for his recovery."

Pacheco, a New Hampshire resident, is working at the District's Edward MacDowell Dam. He is currently working on an emergency response exercise for the Corps and coordinating it with the state of New Hampshire. He said that he has had an excellent experience with the Warrior Workplace Program.

"It's been tremendous," he said. "I think a major part of convalescing is being able to be with family. The CBHCO is taking care of all my needs. They have managed my medical care very closely and it has worked out very, very well."

Pacheco, who was a Civil Affairs Officer with the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion and is a civilian contractor for the Department of Homeland Security, also had high praise for his Corps of Engineers coworkers.

"The people at the Corps are just so tremendous, I feel a little guilty that I can't be there every day because of all the medical appointments I have to go to," he said. "They've been so helpful, I kind of wish I was more heavily involved

than I can be."

"The working relationship between the Massachusetts CBHCO and the New England District is the first in the nation between our two agencies, and has worked so well, we'd like to expand it to different Corps Districts with New England's help," said O'Clair. "We have 170 Soldiers throughout New England, New York and New Jersey, so we have to find a geographical location for a Corps facility that's appropriate and within commuting distance of the Soldier's home."

The Warrior Workplace Program was established by the New England District and the CBHCO to complement existing medical, counseling, advocacy and family support programs.

To realize this joint commitment, said Russo, the District established both a database that identifies each participating Soldier, their home of record and their skill sets -- then finding opportunities with the Corps of Engineers throughout New

England and New York.

"Assisting our warriors back from combat transition into the civilian workforce and rebuild a career is tough under any circumstance -- but it's even tougher to ad-

just to life after a serious injury," said Col. Curtis L. Thalken, Commander, New England District. "We have more than a duty to assist these amazing individuals; we are the proponents of the Warrior Workplace Program and we are advocates for its expansion throughout the Army Corps of Engineers. This is just part of our commitment -- to those Soldiers who have served, sacrificed and are now recovering from their injuries -- to provide the opportunity for these warriors to once again succeed."

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For two of the Soldiers in the Warrior Workplace Program, that horrible instant that changed their lives is over and they are moving on.

At the end of March, Pacheco will complete his convalescence, transition out of the military and return to Baghdad as a contractor for the State Department.

Mintell will not be going back to his job as a carpenter when he completes the Warrior Workplace Program -- he will be staying on as a permanent employee with the New England District. "I like working for the Corps," he said. "I like the outside part and the Federal end of it. It feels like I'm actually still serving..."

... and life can indeed change in an instant and small miracles continue to happen everyday.

'I like working for the Corps. I like the outside part and the federal end of it. It feels like I'm actually still serving.'

- Kurt Mintell